

The Reformers' View of Scripture

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In order to understand how the leading Reformers thought of Scripture, we ought first of all to glance at the mediæval doctrine, which they rejected. To the mediæval theologian the Bible was a book full of divine information or infallible truths about doctrine and morals, and saving faith was assent to correct propositions, found in the Bible, about God, the universe, and the soul of man. But as the Bible contains much which this description does not seem to fit—such as long inventories of temple furniture—it was held that Scripture language has more than one sense. For example, it has a spiritual sense as well as a historical; it may have four different senses. And this made it very hard to know what exactly the Bible does teach.

*"The Reformers' View of Scripture," in *The Doctrine of the Infallible Book*, by Charles Gore (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), 55–60. This version updated July 4, 2017.

56 The Reformer's conception, on the other hand, rises directly out of religious experience.¹ In its pages they found a redeeming God entering into personal touch with men; the Bible is no mere collection of truths, but God's converse with His people. It was in history he had met with believers of old, drawing them to Himself; and by faith, called out in us by the Holy Spirit, we know that He will treat us with the same mercy and judgment as He showed them. If we wish to see clearly, therefore, how He dealt with David or St. Paul, we must interpret the record historically. "We are to go to the Bible feeling that we are having speech with God, and that the speech declares God's heart." Thus the whole Reformation view of Christianity is bound up with a historical treatment of Scripture. But that is only a half-truth. The other half, of still greater importance, is that nothing but the Spirit of God in the heart of the believer enables him to realize that in very truth it is God, and none else, who is seen in the history; none else than He who speaks in the Word, coming near to unveil Himself and declare His saving purpose.

Holding this conviction, the Reformers were able to make a clear distinction between the Word of God, as God's personal and saving declaration of His heart, and the Scriptures, which form the record in and through which this declaration is conveyed

¹ See especially Dr. T. M. Lindsay's article in the *Expositor* for 1894.

to us. Old Protestant Confessions say that in the first place holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (this is the Word of God to men), *thereafter* the revealing Word was put in writing (this is the Bible). But, when saying so, they never lost sight of the cardinal point that it is only in and through the Bible that God's Word of mercy and judgment reaches us. Where, except in Scripture, is Christ offered to sinners? Thus the tie between the Word of God and the Bible is an absolutely vital tie; His Word is recorded and conveyed by the Bible, and the Bible alone. Now if we read the Bible with faith, the Reformers taught, the Holy Spirit enables us to grasp the Word of God contained there as something which is infallibly and authoritatively true. His saving revelation of Himself and of His will comes home to us as a message which is divinely true and commanding, and to which the believer feels he must simply bow in obedience and trust.

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Forty years ago William Robertson Smith, a great Biblical scholar and a deeply convinced Christian, summed up all this in words on which it is not possible to improve. "If I am asked why I receive Scripture as the Word of God, and as the only perfect rule of faith and life, I answer with all the Fathers of the Protestant Church, Because the Bible is the only record of the redeeming love of God, because in the Bible alone I find God drawing near to man in Jesus Christ, and declaring to us in Him His will for our salvation. And this record I know to be true by

the witness of His Spirit in my heart, whereby I am assured that none other than God Himself is able to speak such words to my soul."

58 This is the Reformers' conception in its essence, and it meant in principle a new view and a new use of the Bible. But when we investigate their thought of inspiration—of the question, that is, how the Bible came to have this unique character as the vehicle of God's Word—we are brought face to face with a mixed state of things. It does not seem as if the Reformers (who had many other pressing questions to work at) quite realized where the new evangelical thought of Scripture was to lead, or what it implied for exact Biblical study. Unquestionably a deep religious instinct so guided them that they made the authority of the Bible for faith wholly independent of problems that may and must be raised about the human processes by which the Bible took its present shape. But sometimes what they say about the inspiration of Scripture is in keeping with the new spirit of evangelical liberty, and sometimes it is not.

It ought to be said frankly that Luther often clings to the older notion of a verbally inspired Bible. He actually speaks of the Holy Spirit as the *author* of the books of Moses; he submitted his judgment undoubtingly to Scriptural statements on points of natural science; and in a famous controversy he appealed to a New Testament verse as an infallible oracle, to be accepted with the purest literalism. In some respects he fastened the letters of the Bible

on those who followed him more bindingly than had been done before. The same is true of Calvin. The Bible is to him a volume in which no error has been suffered to appear. The accuracy of every word of the record can be relied on. As he writes: "The full authority which the Scriptures ought to possess for the faithful is not recognized unless they are believed to have come from heaven as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them." In a sermon he says, "Moses was not the author of the Law; he was simply a kind of amanuensis or secretary who wrote what he had received from God."

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This was obviously bound to lead to conclusions which, in a Christian writer, are strange and unwelcome. If any isolated passage of the Bible is as real a mirror of God's mind as the teaching of our Lord, what is Christianity for? Hence it is only too clear that when Calvin declares, as he does, that the example of David in hating his enemies has been set before us by the Holy Spirit for our imitation, Jesus Christ is not being taken in earnest as our supreme moral authority, whose "Love your enemies" is final.

Actually, however, both Luther and Calvin were compelled by facts to break away from the rigid dogma of verbal inspiration which they had inherited. Consistently or not, they faced the undeniable truth that in conveying to us the gift of the Bible, as the adequate and enduring presentation of His redeeming love, God has employed a series of human agencies, and that in the working of these agencies

He has not excluded slight human imperfections. And so Luther and Calvin became, wittingly or not, the precursors of the modern critical study of the Bible. Luther, for example, says of the prophets that they studied Moses and his successors, and that on this foundation they built not only gold and silver, but sometimes also wood, hay, and stubble. The Book of Esther in his view ought not to form part of the Bible. The Gospel of St. John he things best of all, yet he does not shrink from the surmise that it may not invariably give Christ's words in the proper order, and that its account of St. Peter's denial in the house of Caiaphas may contain inaccuracies. There are mistakes in Stephen's speech just before martyrdom, as recorded in Acts vii. The Epistle of St. James he calls "an epistle of straw," and he objects to St. Paul's interpretation of Hagar's name in the Epistle to the Galatians. In the same way, Calvin is forced to admit the presence of errors, as when he roundly declares that it is by a blunder that the name of Jeremiah has crept into St. Matthew xxvii. 9, and the name of Abraham into Acts vii. 16. We need not argue that the Reformers were necessarily right in all these points. The really important thing is the fact that they, like modern scholars, exercised the right to criticize in the interests of truth. Deeper than the professed doctrine of verbal inspiration lay such an assurance of God's saving love in Christ as led them to put aside all trifles whatever minor discrepancies the Biblical narratives might contain.